

Bush Sees Need to Expand Role of NATO in Sudan

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ORLANDO, Fla., Feb. 17 — President Bush signaled a new American commitment on Friday to addressing the crisis in Darfur, saying he would support an expanded role by NATO to shore up a failing African peacekeeping mission there.

Mr. Bush also said he favored doubling the number of peacekeepers operating in Darfur under United Nations control, as proposed by the Security Council last month. He discussed Darfur, in western Sudan, as an offshoot of a question about the fate of children in war-ravaged northern Uganda.

"I talked to [Kofi Annan](#) about this very subject this week," Mr. Bush said, referring to a meeting with the United Nations secretary general. "But it's going to require, I think, a NATO stewardship, planning, facilitating, organizing, probably double the number of peacekeepers that are there now, in order to start bringing some sense of security. There has to be a consequence for people abusing their fellow citizens."

Administration officials said Mr. Bush's comments reflected discussions between the United States and its allies calling for a broader interim role for NATO in Darfur until a larger, United Nations peacekeeping operation can be established.

Fighting between rebel groups and government-backed militias has destroyed entire villages, killing more than 200,000 and displacing about 2 million people. Both the United States and the United Nations have been criticized for responding too slowly to evidence that the African Union peacekeepers were having little effect.

Evangelical Christians have been particularly outspoken in their calls for a more active American role, and Mr. Bush's remarks, in a question-and-answer session in Tampa, appeared to focus increased attention on the issue.

NATO has played a small logistical role in Sudan thus far, primarily airlifting African troops. Until recently, government officials had said NATO might do more, but all the discussion has been about providing equipment, communications and other logistical support.

After President Bush spoke on Friday, a senior State Department official said the United States proposal continued to be "to strengthen the A.U." until United Nations forces arrive late this year.

While Mr. Bush spoke of "a NATO stewardship," the American officials cautioned that NATO would command only logistical operations, not the African Union troops.

They reiterated that Washington would send no American troops. In Congressional testimony this week, Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) said, "We are prepared to talk with our NATO counterparts about what more we can do to support" the African Union forces "until we can get the U.N. forces" into Darfur.

A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Joe Carpenter, said in Washington that no decisions had been made on NATO's role, but "NATO could potentially be a significant leader" in United Nations peacekeeping.

Over the last two years, under NATO auspices, the United States has transported tons of supplies and several thousand African Union troops to western Sudan. The United States has also provided \$190 million for training and building camps for the soldiers, the Pentagon said.

Mr. Bush's comments on Friday were much more specific than his words at the White House earlier this week when he met with Mr. Annan to discuss Darfur.

An official who described the Oval Office session said Mr. Annan had noted that any new United Nations force would need heavier weapons and far better intelligence units than those provided to the African Union. "That can only come from a few places," the official said, "NATO or the United States."

Mr. Bush acknowledged that the African Union troops had been unable to "bring some sense of security to these poor people that are being herded out of their villages and just terribly mistreated."

"The effort was noble," he said, "but it didn't achieve the objective."

At a NATO meeting last week in Taormina, Sicily, an alliance spokesman, James Appathurai, said the United Nation special representative for Sudan, Jan Pronck, briefed defense ministers on the Security Council debate on Darfur. No decisions were made on expanding the NATO role, he said.

"For the moment NATO is doing what it has been asked to do, and that is to extend our airlift and capacity-building operation," he said.

Over the last year, about 7,000 African Union peacekeepers troops have been stationed in Darfur to monitor and enforce a cease-fire between rebel and government troops. In January, the Security Council began to plan to send peacekeepers to Sudan, which envisions a force of as many as 20,000 operating under a broad mandate.

But United Nations officials have acknowledged that winning commitments from member nations to send that many troops is likely to prove difficult. The United States

has stated unequivocally that American combat troops would not be sent there, and other nations have offered similar cautions.

Collecting commitments of troops and deploying them is expected to take up to a year.

In recent days, some members of Congress and others have begun saying they hoped NATO forces could work with the African Union troops until United Nations forces arrive.

"In the interim, let's get NATO involved in this process, because every day you wait, you're going to have more people dying," Senator Sam Brownback, the Kansas Republican, said Thursday in an interview on "The Newshour With Jim Lehrer."

Mr. Bush noted on Friday, as he did last month when asked about Darfur by a student in Kansas, that his Administration was the first to use the word genocide to describe what was happening in Sudan.

"Our country was the first country to call what was taking place a genocide, which matters," he said in front of the audience of about 400 people, who appeared overwhelmingly supportive of Mr. Bush. "Words matter."

Mr. Bush's comments came after he received a briefing on Iraq at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, the headquarters of the United States Central Command and the Special Operations Command.

Reporters were ushered into the briefing room, which had a large map of the Middle East projected on the wall, but Mr. Bush did not comment on Iraq while there, or discuss the focus of the briefing.

Later in the day, in Orlando, at Disney's Contemporary Resort, he did speak about Iraq, at a fund-raiser for the Florida Republican party, raising \$3 million. "Isn't it fun watching a government be formed by some of the same people who have just been living under the thumb" of [Saddam Hussein](#)? Mr. Bush asked the political contributors.

Joel Brinkley and David S. Cloud contributed reporting from Washington for this article.